

Message Text

CONFIDENTIAL POSS DUPE

PAGE 01 PANAMA 00543 01 OF 02 291410Z

47

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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 1 OF 2 PANAMA 0543

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TAGS: PFOR, PINT, PN

SUBJ: ANTI-GOVERNMENT CRITICISM

REF: PANAMA 0273

SUMMARY: TWO INTERNAL POLITICAL DEVELOPMENTS OVER THE PAST FEW DAYS--AN ALLEGED CONEP ATTACK ON GOVERNMENT ECONOMIC POLICIES AND A "MANIFESTO" CALLING FOR GREATER POLITICAL FREEDOM AND PUBLIC DEBATE OF ANY NEW CANAL TREATY--HAVE PROMPTED A SHARP REACTION BY GOP-CONTROLLED PRESS. WHILE NEITHER EVENT IN ITSELF REVEALS A NEW SOURCE OF OPPOSITION TO TORRIJOS, THEY REFLECT A RESURGENCE OF PUBLIC CRITICISM OF THE GOP--NOT SEEN FOR NEARLY A YEAR--AND THE DETERMINATION OF THE GOVERNMENT'S ULTRA-NATIONALISTIC CRITICS TO PRESS THEIR CAMPAIGN FOR AN OPEN DEBATE ON TREATY ISSUES. END SUMMARY

1. THE GOVERNMENT-CONTROLLED PRESS HAS REACTED SWIFTLY AND SHARPLY TO CRITICISMS OF THE GOP'S ECONOMIC POLICIES WHICH WERE REPORTEDLY VOICED BY NATIONAL COUNCIL OF PRIVATE ENTERPRISE (CONEP) PRESIDENT RICARDO CUCALON AND OTHER CONEP AND PRIVATE SECTOR SPEAKERS AT A JANUARY 23 CONEP SPONSORED MEETING AT THE CHIRIQUI CHAMBER OF COMMERCE IN DAVID. THE ATTACKS ON GOVERNMENT POLICIES, CONFIDENTIAL
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PAGE 02 PANAMA 00543 01 OF 02 291410Z

WHICH MATUTINO OF JANUARY 25 LABELED AS "VIOLENT" BUT DID NOT REPORT IN GREAT DETAIL, APPARENTLY PAINTED A BLACK

FORECAST FOR THE NATION'S ECONOMY IN TERMS OF INFLATION AND PRODUCTIVITY. THE GOP'S EDITORIAL RESPONSE--IN MATUTINO JANUARY 25 AND CRITICA JANUARY 27--REITERATED THE GOVERNMENT'S DETERMINATION TO DEAL WITH THE COUNTRY'S ECONOMIC PROBLEMS ON THE BASIS OF THE DECLARATION OF BOQUETE, CONTRASTED THE OBSTRUCTIONIST ATTITUDE OF THE CHIRIQUI CRITICS WITH NATIONAL POPULAR SUPPORT FOR THE GOVERNMENT'S ECONOMIC POLICIES, AND POINTEDLY WARNED AGAINST "SEDITIONOUS" ATTEMPTS BY A SMALL GROUP OF THE FORMERLY PRIVILEGED TO EMPLOY THE SPECTER OF AN INFLATIONARY ECONOMIC CRISIS AS A POLITICAL WEAPON. FOR ITS PART MATUTINO'S BLANCO Y NEGRO COLUMN OF JANUARY 26 PURPORTED TO SEE THE HAND OF THE CIA BEHIND THE CHIRIQUI MEETING IN PARTICULAR AND ANTI-GOP PRESSURE GROUP ACTIVITIES IN GENERAL.

2. IN A SEPARATE BUT POLITICALLY RELATED DEVELOPMENT, THE SEMI-INDEPENDENT LA ESTRELLA ON JANUARY 26 PUBLISHED A "MANIFESTO," DATED JANUARY 9, DEMANDING MORE POLITICAL FREEDOM TO DEBATE CANAL TREATY ISSUES AND ASSERTING THAT, WITHOUT UNRESTRICTED DISCUSSION, ANY PLEBISCITE ON A NEW TREATY "WOULD BE NEITHER LEGITIMATE NOR AUTHENTIC." THE MANIFESTO, SIGNED BY 111 BUSINESSMEN AND PROFESSIONALS, PROCLAIMING THE NEED FOR A NATIONAL CONSENSUS ON THE CANAL ISSUE AND MAINTAINED THAT A CONSENSUS WAS IMPOSSIBLE IF THE COUNTRY LACKS "THE CLIMATE OF FREEDOMS" NECESSARY FOR ALL SECTORS TO VOICE THEIR OPINIONS "WITHOUT RESTRICTION." IT STATED THAT SUCH FREE POPULAR DISCUSSION REQUIRED "THE POSSIBILITY OF POLITICAL ORGANIZATION BY OPINION GROUPS...IDEOLOGICAL PLURALISM...ABSOLUTE GUARANTEES OF EXPRESSION AND ASSEMBLY," AND CHARGED THAT "DESPITE ITS MANY PROMISES, THE GOVERNMENT HAS FORGOTTEN THAT NOT TOO LONG AGO IT PROMISED TO ESTABLISH AND STIMULATE A CLIMATE OF PUBLIC FREEDOMS THAT WOULD ALLOW THE WIDEST DEBATE ON CANAL PROBLEMS." PURSUING THE ATTACK, THE MANIFESTO ENDORSED THE GOVERNMENT'S REQUIREMENT FOR NATIONAL UNITY BUT WARNED THAT "IT CANNOT BE PERMITTED THAT, IN THE NAME OF UNITY, ACCEPTANCE OF THE DOCUMENT THE GOVERNMENT WOULD SIGN WITH THE UNITED STATES BE IMPOSED UPON NATIONAL OPINION, WITHOUT THE TERMS AND CONDITIONS BEING DISCUSSED FIRST."CONCLUDING
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PAGE 03 PANAMA 00543 01 OF 02 291410Z

WITH AN ACCUSATION OF A POSSIBLE TORRIJOS SELL-OUT, THE MANIFESTO STATED THAT ITS SIGNATORIES "CANNOT BUT FEEL THAT THE PRESENT ECONOMIC AND FISCAL SITUATION, COMPLICATED BY INFLATION AND RECESSION, MIGHT BE USED AS A PRETEXT TO PRECIPITATE AGREEMENT ON A TREATY THAT WILL IGNORE THE STRUGGLES OF THE PAST AND COMPROMISE NATIONAL DIGNITY, PRESENT AND FUTURE."

3. THE GOP'S INITIAL COMMENT ON THE MANIFESTO, IN MATUTINO'S REVOLUTIONARY FOCUS COLUMN OF JANUARY 27,

RIDICULED THE DOCUMENT'S AUTHORS AS AN UNHOLY ALLIANCE
OF PSEUDOSOCIALISTS, EX-COMMUNISTS, CLERICS, REACTIONAIRES,
ULTRA-CONSERVATIVES, ARNULFISTAS, LIBERALS, CHRISTIAN
DEMOCRATS, ETC. ALLEGING THAT THEIR ONLY COMMON DENOMINATOR
WAS A DESIRE FOR CHAOS AND A RETURN TO THE PAST--AND
PASSING IT OFF AS NOTHING NEW--THE COLUMN DISMISSED THE
CHARGE OF A LACK OF FREE EXPRESSION BY CITING THE
MANIFESTO ITSELF. THE COLUMN--A RECOGNIZED VEHICLE OF THE GOP--
ALSO REMINDED ITS READERS THAT TORRIJOS HAS MANY TIMES
REAFFIRMED THAT, AS PROVIDED IN THE CONSTITUTION, THE
PEOPLE WILL HAVE THE LAST WORD ON A NEW TREATY AND OBSERVED
THAT THE MANIFESTO FORMED PART OF THE STRATEGY OF THE
MOST REACTIONARY ELEMENTS OF CONEP AND THE CHAMBER OF
COMMERCE, ALLIED WITH THE REMAINING PARTISANS OF ARNULFO
ARIAS. WITH A FINAL SARCASTIC TOUCH, THE COLUMN NOTED IN
A POSTSCRIPT THAT SINCE JANUARY 1, WHEN THE MANIFESTO WAS
DRAFTED, EFFORTS ON THE PART OF ITS PROPONENTS HAD
PRODUCED BUT 111 SIGNATURES, "AS MANY AS THE MEMBERS OF THE
OTOQUE ORIENTE COMMUNAL JUNTA."
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PAGE 01 PANAMA 00543 02 OF 02 291416Z

47

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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 2 OF 2 PANAMA 0543

4. COMMENT: THE ATTACKS ON THE GOP'S ECONOMIC
POLICIES AT THE CONEP SPONSORED MEETING IN DAVID--AND
THE GOVERNMENT'S SHARP REACTION--CONSTITUTE A SETBACK
IN THE NEARLY YEAR-LONG RAPPROCHEMENT BETWEEN TORRIJOS

AND CONEP. HOW SERIOUS THE SETBACK IS REMAINS TO BE SEEN. THE GOP HAS MADE IT CLEAR IT WANTS PRIVATE SECTOR COOPERATION IN ITS ECONOMIC AUSTERITY AND PRODUCTIVITY EFFORTS, AND THE GOP'S RESPONSE MAY BE INTENDED IN PART AS A WARNING TO CONEP'S NEW PRESIDENT THAT TORRIJOS WILL NOT TOLERATE OPEN ATTACKS ON HIS ECONOMIC PROGRAM AND HIS EMPHASIS ON THE NEED FOR NATIONAL UNITY IN THE FACE OF ADVERSITY. THE SHARPNESS OF THE REACTION TO THE CONEP MEETING MAY ALSO BE DUE IN PART TO THE MANIFESTO. TORRIJOS WAS UNDOUBTEDLY AWARE OF ITS EXISTENCE ON JANUARY 9 OR SHORTLY THEREAFTER. THE EXISTENCE OF THE MANIFESTO, AS WELL AS THE ANTI-GOVERNMENT ACTIVITIES OF THE ULTRA-NATIONALISTIC REVOLUTIONARY STUDENT FRONT (FER) ON JANUARY 9, CAN BE SEEN IN RETROSPECT AS HAVING STIMULATED TORRIJOS' JANUARY 13 ATTACK ON HIS HARD-LINE CRITICS (REFTEL AND THE SPATE OF RECENT EDITORIALS DENOUNCING "PRESSURE GROUPS" AND CRITICIZING "SUPER PATRIOTS." THE SUPPRESSION OF THE MANIFESTO UNTIL NOW MAY HAVE RESULTED FROM THE GOP'S DESIRE TO AVOID EMBARRASSING CONTROVERSY CONCERNING THE CANAL TREATY NEGOTIATION DURING AMBASSADOR
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PAGE 02 PANAMA 00543 02 OF 02 291416Z

BUNKERS'S VISIT. THE TIMING OF THE MANIFESTO'S PUBLICATION TO COINCIDE WITH THE GOP'S TOUGH REACTION TO THE DAVID CONEP MEETING MAY IN TURN HAVE BEEN A DELIBERATE MOVE TO TAR THE MANIFESTO WITH A REACTIONARY STIGMA. ALTHOUGH THE GOP PRESS HAS GIVEN THE DOCUMENT A REACTIONARY LABEL, IT ALSO SARCASTICALLY OBSERVED THAT IT CONTAINS SIGNATURES OF THOSE ON THE OTHER SIDE OF THE POLITICAL SPECTRUM. (WE NOTE, FOR EXAMPLE, THAT FORMER SOCIALIST CARLOS IVAN ZUNIGA AND ULTRA-NATIONALIST ALBERTO QUIROS GUARDIA, DIRECTOR OF RADIO IMPACTO, ARE LISTED AS SIGNERS TOGETHER WITH CONEP PRESIDENT CUCALON AND SEVERAL CONSERVATIVE BUSINESSMEN WHO, ACCORDING TO 1973 INTELLIGENCE REPORTS, WERE PROVIDING FUNDS TO THE FRENTE CIVILISTA NACIONAL--NOT TO BE CONFUSED WITH THE NATIONAL CIVIC MOVEMENT--FOR THE PURPOSE OF OVERTHROWING TORRIJOS.) NOTWITHSTANDING THE SARCASM WITH WHICH THE MANIFESTO WAS INITIALLY GREETED, THE GOP PRESS REACTION--AS DID TORRIJOS' JANUARY 13 ATTACK--REFLECT THE GENERAL'S SENSITIVITY AND CONCERN OVER ALLEGATIONS OF A POSSIBLE "SELL-OUT" IN THE CANAL TREATY NEGOTIATION. TORRIJOS' OPPONENTS APPEAR TO HAVE DECIDED TO TRY TO EXPLOIT BOTH THE GOP'S ECONOMIC PROBLEMS AND THE CANAL TREATY ISSUE. ON THE LATTER, THE HARD-LINERS' STRATEGY SEEMS TO BE DESIGNED EITHER TO FORCE A PUBLIC DISCLOSURE OF TREATY ISSUES PRIOR TO A FINAL US-PANAMA AGREEMENT OR TO PROVOKE AN OVERT GOP MOVE AGAINST THEM, THEREBY GIVING CREDENCE TO THEIR ALLEGATIONS THAT TORRIJOS HAS SOMETHING TO HIDE.
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